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SUBJECT: MALAWI EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WORSE OFF THAN
BEFORE FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION

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¶11. SUMMARY. According to the recently released "Free Primary Education For All" report, dropout rates, repetition rates, and qualified teacher-to-pupil ratios in public primary schools have all worsened over the past ten years. At the same time, overall enrollment and government expenditures on public education increased. Recent attempts by the Government of Malawi (GOM) to increase the number of qualified teachers demonstrate that the GOM recognizes that the quality of public education was compromised at the expense of quantity when Free Primary Education (FPE) was introduced in 1994. END SUMMARY.

Free Primary Education: 10 YEARS ON

¶12. Analyzing free primary education since its introduction ten years ago, the recently released "Free Primary Education For All" report, published by the Centre for Educational Research and Training at the University of Malawi, asserts that quality was compromised for quantity in an attempt to quickly implement Free Primary Education. In its analysis of the education system the report looks at the relationship between public education spending and education outcomes in primary schools. Primary school in Malawi, is supposed to begin at age six and last eight years.

¶13. On education expenditure, the report notes that over the past ten years the GOM has increased its education budget every year, but the budget increases have not been proportional to the increasing student enrollment. Most of the money in the education budget goes for teachers' salaries, leaving little money for expansion and maintenance of school facilities.

¶14. Dropout rates have also dramatically increased. The report notes that over seventy percent of children who entered primary school between 1990-2000 dropped out before finishing, with most citing the costs of school uniforms and supplies as the most common reasons. The largest percentage of dropouts occurred the year free primary school was introduced, and the rate has marginally improved each year since. However, a higher percentage of students still drop out than before free primary education.

¶15. In addition to high dropout rates, the majority of primary students have repeated at least one grade, which represents a twenty percent increase from the repetition rates prior to the introduction of FPE. The percentage of unqualified (untrained) teachers also rose from twenty percent prior to FPE to fifty percent four years later, and the number of pupils per English and Math textbook doubled because of the enrollment increases following the introduction of FPE.

¶16. Officials, including the current Minister of Education, acknowledge that more planning should have gone into the introduction of FPE in 1994. However, the education system's largest obstacle is budgetary constraints. Last year, the Ministry requested MK 13 billion (\$130 million), and Parliament approved a budget of MK 6 billion (\$60 million). However, the amount actually received by the Ministry was less than MK 6 billion. Of the Ministry's received funding, MK 4 billion (\$40 million) went to pay teachers' salaries. The budget shortfalls have been left to members of the donor community to cover. In 1998 alone, donors provided almost ninety-five percent of the money spent on school facilities improvement and teacher training.

¶17. According to the report, the introduction of free primary education in Malawi has not produced a system of universal primary education. Even before factoring in dropout and grade repetition rates, only eighty percent of children enroll in school. Education in Malawi is not compulsory at any age.

INTRODUCTION OF FPE

18. Both of the major parties in the 1994 elections, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), promised free primary education. The MCP stated that they would continue to gradually implement FPE, while the UDF did not publicly comment on their plan for FPE. When the UDF won the presidential elections in May 1994, the President announced that primary schools would be free at the start of school in September. Prior to the implementation of FPS, the GOM did not undertake a study of the current educational system to see where improvements were needed.

19. 3.2 million children signed up to attend school in September 1994, an enrollment increase of 70% from the previous year. The GOM allowed any child to enroll in any grade, resulting in many overaged children attending school. There was a particularly large increase in Standard 8 (the last grade in primary school) enrollment, which suggested many children who had dropped out re-enrolled when school was free in the hopes of attending secondary school. To handle the increased number of students, the GOM hired 22,000 new teachers, 20,000 of whom were unqualified. These teachers were given a two-week training course prior to being sent into the field.

PRIOR TO FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION

10. Prior to the introduction of FPE in Malawi, the school system had been funded primarily through student fees. The enrollment figures of Malawian primary schools have been steadily increasing since Malawi gained its independence in 1964. Starting in the 1991-1992 school year, the GOM, along with help from the World Bank, began to introduce fee waivers for children in the first four years of primary school, as a way to entice parents to send their children to school. The year that fee waivers were introduced there was a 40% increase in enrollment in the first grade of primary school, meaning that many parents were encouraged to enroll their children in school when the cost was drastically reduced or eliminated.

11. The GOM along with USAID introduced the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) program in 1991-1992. This program provided school fee waivers for non-repeating primary school girls in most primary school grades. This program led to a twelve percent increase in primary school enrollment for girls.

COMMENT

12. The decision to implement FPE four months after the 1994 elections was a way for the UDF to communicate to the rural masses that multi-party democracy meant big changes from Dr. Banda's elitist dictatorship. GOM officials, however, expanded public education without taking into account the state of education in Malawi and the ability of the existing schools to handle the increased enrollment. That lack of planning before implementation continues to hinder the expansion of education in Malawi, ten years later.

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